

IN YOUR LYING DOWN AND IN YOUR RISING UP: A BIBLICAL SLEEP ETHIC

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Human life requires sleep. It is no wonder that the Bible, the central text of Jewish tradition, to which the Jewish people have looked for guidance over the last few millennia, would not fail to speak about this human condition. These texts may offer perspectives regarding one's conduct and approach toward sleep.

What does the Bible prescribe for our sleep? The Torah speaks twice about lying down to sleep. In Deuteronomy 6:7 and 11:19 we are told to *recite* [the Lord's instructions in previous verses] *when you lie down . . .* These verses refer to speaking words of Torah. Psalm 4:5 says, more subjectively, *Ponder it on your bed, and sigh*, or more literally, *speak in your heart when on your bed, and be utterly silent*. Psalm 149:5 exults, *Let the faithful shout for joy upon their couches*.

These verses speak of what to do when going to or in bed. There are a few verses that advise what not to do. Micah warns against cogitating about ways to do wrong: *Woe to those who plan iniquity and design evil on their beds* (Mic. 2:1). Similarly, David describes the wicked person as the one who *in bed plots mischief; he is set on a path of no good; he doth not abhor evil!* (Ps. 36:5). Indeed, it is sleep-depriving to think of evil on one's bed, as Solomon the Wise exclaims: *Do not enter on the path of the wicked; do not walk on the way of evil men. Avoid it; do not pass through it; turn away from it; pass it by. For they cannot sleep unless they make someone fall, they are robbed of sleep* (Prov. 4:14-16). Seeking an opportunity to do ill bodes poorly for those who, rather than speaking of the words of Torah on their beds or communing with their hearts, think of doing evil.

Which activities would enable someone to sleep better? The Bible offers answers in three passages. The first of these is: *If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, . . . you shall lie down untroubled by anyone* (Lev. 26:3,6). This equation of heeding God's commandments and statutes and fulfilling them will result in one's sleeping well – perhaps because

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doing the right thing soothes the conscience, or perhaps because of some pattern of virtue-and-reward. Proverbs has a similar approach: *My son, do not lose sight of [the Lord's wisdom and understanding]; hold on to resourcefulness and foresight . . . Then . . . when you lie down you will be unafraid; you will lie down and your sleep will be sweet* (Prov. 3:21, 24). Zophar the Naamathite advises Job toward good and evil which mirror Micah's sentiments: *But if you direct your mind, and spread forth your hands toward Him – if there is iniquity with you, remove it, and do not let injustice reside in your tent – . . . [then], you will rest secure; you will lie down undisturbed* (Job 11:13-14, 18-19).

So far, the bed is a place for thinking good thoughts and forming good intentions. But should one sleep regardless of what is going on around and concerning him? There are three references to time when one should not go to sleep before one has attended to an urgent task. One applies to a creditor, who holds the borrower's garment as a pledge of repayment: *If he is a needy man, you shall not go to sleep in his pledge [i.e. the garment]; you must return the pledge to him at sunset, that he may sleep in his cloth and bless you; and it will be to your merit before the Lord your God* (Deut. 24:12-13). From this rule that the creditor must give the borrower the use of the garment at night, it is learned that some kind of garment was worn for sleeping.

The Book of Proverbs also deals with times when sleep should be postponed. One is on the need to extricate oneself speedily from a rash undertaking and *Give your eyes no sleep, your pupils no slumber*¹ (Prov. 6:4). Another passage makes a contrast: *He who lays in stores during the summer is a capable son, but he who sleeps during the harvest causes shame* (10:5). This verse addresses itself not to over-sleeping, but to sloth when there is work that must be done.

In both Psalms and Ecclesiastes, there are comparisons of those who sleep or do not sleep in a context of necessity. The first paradigm is offered by David in a Song of Ascents: *In vain do you rise early and stay up late, you who toil for the bread you eat; He provides much for His loved ones while they sleep* (Ps. 127:2). David seemingly indicates the emptiness of sleep deprivation because of the need to work, whereas those who are beloved by God sleep well. Although both sets of people could be eating the bread of toil, it is the second group that sleeps well, ultimately because those in the first group

deprive themselves of sleep unnecessarily by ignoring God. Important to take into account here is that:

While lack of sleep is common to both (this verse and Proverbs 4:16), in Proverbs, it is presented as involuntary, while in Micah (and Psalm 36:5) it would appear to be quite voluntary, a further sign of perversity: not only do they do evil during the day, but they lose sleep at night planning it out.²

The passage in Ecclesiastes also involves labor: *A worker's sleep is sweet, whether he has much or little to eat; but the rich man's abundance doesn't let him sleep* (Eccl. 5:11). It is possible that Hillel's statement in the Mishna reflects this verse in that "the more possessions, the more worry,"³ perhaps suggesting the burden of anxiety in having to protect property. An alternative interpretation is that those who exert themselves in toil sleep better than those who are sedentary.

A warning against over-sleeping appears three times in Proverbs, though no place else in the Bible: *Do not love sleep lest you be impoverished; keep your eyes open and you will have plenty of food* (20:13); *drowsing will clothe you in tatters* (23: 21); and *A bit more sleep, a bit more slumber, a bit more hugging yourself in bed, and poverty will come calling upon you, and want, like an armed man* (24:33-34). All these verses point to the relationship between indolent sleep and poverty. The first and third are straightforward statements, while the second seems to say that drowsiness rather than an abundance of sleep will lead to poverty. This verse seems comparable to Psalm 127:2 in suggesting the consequences of denying oneself adequate sleep.

The biblical sleep ethic covers a spectrum of references:

In attempting to account for the different ways sleep comes into play in evaluative statements, one might place them on a continuum: the beloved of [God] who sleep and are provided for (Ps. 127:2), those who deprive themselves of sleep for "good reason" (Ps. 127:1), those who lose sleep because they have not been successfully evil (Prov. 4:16), and those who voluntarily lose sleep in order to plan for evil (Mic. 2:1; Ps. 36:5). But this continuum, while compatible, and perhaps explanatory, goes considerably beyond the degree of systematization present in the texts.⁴

From this perspective one can view the general categories of the Bible's imperatives on sleep: After retiring for the night, think/speak only of worthy matters; do not plan evil against other people; do not sleep before pressing duties have been performed.

In sum, it is the connection to God and His ways that will help us to sleep undisturbed. Keeping these lessons in mind will give us a better understanding how the Jewish biblical tradition treats this inescapable universal activity, which, indeed, consumes about one-third of our lives.

NOTES

1. For the difference between sleep and slumber in the Bible, Sonia Ancoli-Israel described the various degrees of sleep in the Bible: *Tenumah* often is used to mean drowsy, which could refer to dozing off or lighter sleep [i.e., technically speaking, Stage 1 sleep (e.g., *yanum* in Isaiah 5:27; *namu* in Psalm 76:6)]. *Yashen* and *shena* are used to refer to unconscious thought that becomes unconscious and involuntary, words that could also describe Stage 2 sleep (e.g., *mishnato* in Genesis 28:16). *Radum* implies a heavy or deep sleep [i.e., Stages 3 and 4 sleep (e.g., *vayaradom*, *nirdam* in Jonah 1:5, 6)] or is often also used for sleep that is Divinely induced, that is, sleep that is involuntary, such as the sleep of Adam when his rib was removed (e.g., *tardemah* in Genesis 2:21). The last stage of sleep, *tardemah*, refers to a period where the flow of thoughts continue in dreams or in revelation, a perfect description of REM sleep (e.g., Genesis 15:12). Sonia Ancoli-Israel, "Sleep Disorders in the Bible" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31:3 (July-September 2003) pp. 143-152.
2. Thomas H. McAlpine, *Sleep, Divine & Human, in the Old Testament* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987) p. 128.
3. Mishna Avot 2:8
4. McAlpine, loc. cit.